

POSTSCRIPT

by Jack Post

Last Sunday, on the rising tide, the Clark's Island picnic lured an enthusiastic crowd of visitors to Cedarfield. They came in little boats and big, under sail or by motor to the simple farmhouse so dear to Sarah Wingate Taylor in her lifetime that she left it in trust to the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society, with the charge that it should be used to sustain the memory of our Pilgrim ancestors on the hallowed ground of this island.

On that bleak December Sunday in 1620, the Pilgrims had held their first religious service ashore in the New World, here at Election Rock, on the high land from which they could see that the Lord had guided them to an island, safe from Indian marauders. They gave thanks for their delivery from yesterday's gale, and looked across the bay towards the harbor which tomorrow they would explore, as soon as they could repair the broken mast and rudder of the shallop. They would find a fresh water brook, a defensible hill, and abandoned corn fields suitable for crops. They would sail the Mayflower down across the bay, and here establish their home.

Clark's Island has hardly changed in 3½ centuries. Covered then with stands of virgin timber, it provided masts for sailing ships, and lumber, both for the growing Plymouth Colony, and for the new one developing around Massachusetts Bay, with the proceeds going to the support of their minister. When Governor Andros appropriated the island for one of his henchmen, the Pilgrims sued for its return and won in court at London, but at so high a cost in legal fees they were forced to sell their recovered land, and soon the Watson family, still the major landowners of the island kingdom, had acquired control

because of its island location is relatively isolated from foxes, dogs, and cats. Since the land is privately owned, and visitors except by invitation are not generally welcomed on Clark's Island, the birds have a further measure of protection against humans, especially during the breeding season when the nest areas will be posted and patrolled.

One interesting corollary to the study of herons is the discovery that the thickness of the egg shells is directly proportionate to the amount of pollution in the neighboring bay. Thus the birds provide man with an accurate indicator of risks to which both species are exposed. Happily, Duxbury Bay is among the least polluted on our coast. Once again, Clark's Island, wild and overgrown though it may be, provides protection to our generation as it did in a different way to the Pilgrims in the winter storm of 1620.

Over the years, the Island served as a salt manufactory, as a safe place of detention for the "praying Indians," converted to Christianity, and hence not to be left to the mercy of their unconverted brethren during King Phillip's War. It became a quarantine island in times of plague, and, later on, a prosperous farm that Thoreau visited, almost drowning when he tried to walk there across the flats before the coming tide. A century ago, Clark's Island turnips commanded a premium in the Boston market; but like other New England areas, produce from the rocky soil and the small fields could not compete with the rich and rolling prairies after the advent of the railroads. Clark's Island gradually reverted to wilderness, except around the dozen Watson houses clustered mostly along the west and south shores.

Owners by eminent domain have shown up in recent years, seagulls by the thousands and now herons in increasing numbers, until this year the island supports the largest heronry on the Atlantic coast. A carefully conducted survey by the Manomet Bird Observatory counted 500 heron nests, including those of the black-crowned night heron, great blue heron, little blue heron, snowy egret, American egret, and glossy ibis. The herons nest in the trees, favoring the cedars, with gulls all around them on the ground, a working partnership that helps discourage predators with numbers, although a great horned owl this year wreaked a certain amount of havoc, mostly among the ibis eggs and chicks which it seemed to prefer.

Thanks to the screeching birds and the unattractive mess they produce, and also because of the verdant poison ivy, not many people care to invade this spectacular rookery, which.